



THE COMPLETE PICTURE: This is a stitched image of the Merlion and Esplanade. On the website, the viewer can pan from one end to the other. (PHOTO: ARAM PAN)

360° TOURS OF SINGAPORE

Virtual reality enthusiast creates website with panoramic views of places of interest

CLAIRE HUANG

STROLL through the Sungei Buloh nature reserve and zoom in for a closer look at the flora and fauna.

Or, take a walk down Esplanade Bridge to see Singapore's icon, the Merlion – without stepping out of the house.

With the emergence of Virtual Reality (VR) technology, what was once used only to show properties online to potential buyers is now being used to display popular local watering holes and tourist attractions.

Mr Aram Pan has created Singapore's first VR website – www.singaporevr.com – that is dedicated to exploring quirky nooks and corners of the island.

He hopes that this “mini encyclopedia” will give tourists and Singaporeans alike “a holistic view of Singapore”.

VR is a technology which allows users to interact with a computer-simulated environment.

“There's this biased view that VR can only be used for property and I want to help people take a fresh look at it,” he said.

Calling it his kind of art, the 32-year-old has been dabbling

in VR photography for a decade. But it was only in the last four years that he took it seriously.

About three years ago, he bore the idea of featuring less trodden places like the Kranji War Memorial and the Courts of Hell at the Haw Par Villa theme park.

The start-up cost him about \$20,000. Using his own money, he set up the website with the help of his two colleagues.

He revealed that the most taxing part of the hobby is the post-production work.

This includes stitching the photos together to create a cube or a sphere, and fine tuning it. That takes at least an hour or two and the end-product is known as a VR Paranoma.

Although it sounds simple, the process involves many difficulties, from taking the photographs before the subjects in the venue move, to perfecting the contrasts in lighting during post production.

Still, the VR aficionado finds it all worthwhile.

“VRs are immersive and have a much more powerful impact than the usual photos or videos because they capture the entire sphere and give people a sense of space and depth,” he said.

He added that a video is “just a clip within a frame” and the au-



PURSUIT OF PASSION: Mr Aram Pan's hobby cost him about \$20,000. (PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN)

dience cannot interact or have control of where they want to go in the clip.

Through word-of-mouth, his website has already garnered over 1,270 eyeballs since its launch seven weeks ago.

Describing his non-commercial website as “very new”, Mr Pan, who also has his own health supplement company at the IMM Building in Jurong, hopes that by next month, the website will be fully functional.

“I am certainly hoping that the website can progress into an online magazine with a twist, but whatever the outcome, it's still what I love to do,” he said.

The passion has, indeed, earned Mr Pan some praise.

Ms Francisco Perez who resides in Florida, in the United States left this comment on the website: “Awesome site. Keep it up and updated, please.”

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HELPDESK 我的字典

Virtual reality:
虚拟现实
xū nǐ xiàn shí

Encyclopedia:
百科全书
bǎi kē quán shū

Afficionado: 迷 mí

ComCare to spend at least \$1m to help soften price rises

THE first step in a joint effort to help needy Singaporeans cope with the rising cost of food items has come in the form of a \$1 million kitty.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), National Trades Union Congress and NTUC Fairprice, along with private food retailers and distributors, have formed a loose group to find ways to tackle the problem, The Straits Times reported.

Details will be announced

“very soon”, said Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Yu-Foo Yee Shoon. For now, MCYS is shelling out at least \$1 million from its Comcare Fund, she added.

“There is enough budget and we are ready to supplement the effort,” she said.

ComCare is a fund Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong first announced in January 2005, to help those left behind – namely the elderly, the poor and the job-

less – as Singapore gets on with economic restructuring.

The Straits Times understands that others in the group will also contribute, in cash or kind.

Prices of essential household items like coffee, tea, canned drinks, condensed milk and sugar, have been rising in the past year.

This effort followed an announcement last Thursday by Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry S. Iswaran

that his ministry is working with MCYS to explore new schemes to help those affected by the price hikes.

Two days ago, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan promised that the Government will provide “targeted assistance to people in greatest need”.

Responding to reporters' queries at a senior citizen walkathon at Bishan Park yesterday, Mrs Yu-Foo said while Singapo-

reans could still afford rice now, the general price increases add up and can affect their financial situation.

She gave the assurance that MCYS will adopt a multi-pronged approach to help them through its social assistance schemes.

Anyone who needs assistance should call the ComCare helpline at 1800-222-0000.

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